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The theory and historical development of expletives (and non-referential arguments)

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I. Introduction: theory and diachrony

- **Goal of this workshop**: bringing together theoretical and historical linguists and sharing ideas and insights pertaining to the nature, emergence and analysis of expletives (and non-referential arguments more generally), in particular:
  - How can the diachronic facts inform the theoretical modelling of expletives?
  - How can theoretical work lead to a better understanding of the relevant historical developments?

- **This intro**: brief overview of relevant data, theoretical approaches and research questions concerning the analysis of expletives

1. Introduction: theory and diachrony

- At least since Chomsky (1981) expletives have been a major topic in theoretical linguistics.
- Still, central issues remain unresolved and controversial:
  - semantically empty elements (Chomsky 1981) OR semantically contentful elements (cf. recently Tsiakmakis & Espinal 2022)?
  - surface position = merge position (Chomsky 1981) OR surface position = derived position (Biberauer & Richards 2005)?
  - Should CP expletives be analyzed on a par with subject expletives?

- Even less clear: diachronic (and typological) aspects –
  - How and why do expletives develop historically?
  - Lexical sources for the grammaticalization of expletives?
  - Why are expletives quite rare cross-linguistically (and develop quite late in the history of Germanic)?

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2. A descriptive overview: types of expletives – surface position

- Expletives (syntactic placeholders, "dummy"/"pleonastic" elements):
  - (apparently) semantically empty
  - primarily serve a syntactic function: marking a position that must be obligatorily filled:
    - SpecTP in English, French, MSC (Dutch, Afrikaans) – subject expletives
    - SpecCP in the Germanic V2 languages – CP expletives

(1) There arrived 10 linguists in Bochum. /...that there arrived 10 linguists in Bochum.

(2) Es   sind 10 Linguisten gekommen/... dass (*es) 10 Linguisten gekommen sind.
    EXPL are   10 linguists   come
    '10 linguists came.'

2. A descriptive overview: form & etymology

- Different elements in the various languages:
  - **third person singular neuter pronouns ('it')**: German, Yiddish *es*, Dutch *het*, Icel. *það*, Far. *tað*, Swedish/Norwegian/Danish *det* 'it'; French *il* < Lat. *ille*
  - **(deictic) locatives ('there')**: earlier Icelandic *þar,* Danish/Norwegian *der*, Dutch *er* (weak form of *daar*)

- Both types go back to **deictic/demonstrative** elements (Germanic *d/th*-Forms < PIE demonstrative root **so/*tod* 'this, that'; *it*-forms < PIE **he*-, neut. **hid* 'that, the (just named)'; cf. Beekes 2011: 226).

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2. A descriptive overview: expletives vs. other non-referential pro-forms

- Traditional distinction between
  - expletives – purely syntactic placeholders, not part of the verb's argument structure (Engl. *there*)
  - quasi-arguments: non-referential pronouns, part of the verb's argument structure (Engl. *it*)
  - cataphoric pronouns: occupy an argument position, referring to an extraposed clause (Engl. *it*)

(3)   There are many open questions.

(4)   It is raining./Beat it!

(5)   It's unfortunately true [that we still haven't sorted it all out].

- *it*-type pronouns trigger agreement on the verb (3sg)
- *there*-type pronouns: verb agrees with a lower subject (the associate)
- different forms in English (similarly in Danish (*det/der*) and Dutch (*het/er*))

2. A descriptive overview: expletives vs. other non-referential pro-forms

- **German/Yiddish**: a single form *es* ('it') fulfilling different functions; due to their different syntactic behavior, different types are distinguished (cf. e.g. Brugmann 1917):

(6) a. Es   wird getanzt.   (CP-expletive *es*: confined to clause-
      EXPL is   danced   initial position)

    b. Heute wird (*es)   getanzt.
       today   is   EXPL danced

(7) a. Heute regnet *(es).   (quasi-argument *es*: obligatorily present)
       today rains   it
       'Today, it is raining.'

    b. Heute hat ?(es) mich überrascht, [dass es regnet].   (cataphoric *es*: optionally present)
       today has it   me   surprised   that it rains
       'Today, it has surprised me that it is raining.'

2. A descriptive overview: expletives vs. other non-referential pro-forms

- **Icelandic:** the expletive *það* can only appear in prefinite position; in contrast to other Germanic languages, Icelandic lacks quasi-argumental pro-forms (e.g. with weather verbs); *það* is also used as a cataphoric pronoun, (9):

(8) a. Það rigndi í gær.
         EXPL rained yesterday

   b. *Í gær   rigndi það.
      yesterday   rained EXPL
      'It rained yesterday' (Booth 2018: 57)

(9)   Hann hélt   [að það gæti   verið skemmtilegt [að rækta tómata]].
        he   thought that it   could be   interesting   to grow tomatoes
        (Thráinsson 2007: 355)

2. A descriptive overview: expletives vs. other non-referential pro-forms

- **Norwegian/Swedish**: Single form (*det*) for all non-referential functions (cf. e.g Vikner 1995); the expletive element is not restricted to prefinite position; rather, it is also required in (postfinite) subject position, similar to English, (11):

(10) a. Det regnar.
          it   rains

      b. Det är bra   att du har kommit.
          it   is good that you have come

      c. Det   har kommit en pojke.
          there has come   a boy
          (Swedish, Vikner 1995: 225)

(11) a. Det dansades   i går.
          EXPL dance.PST.PASS yesterday

      b. I går   dansades   det.
          yesterday   dance.PST.PASS EXPL
          (Swedish, Booth 2018: 143)

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2. A descriptive overview: restrictions – verb type

▪ **Subject expletives**: possible with most unaccusative verbs, but impossible with unergatives and transitives:

(12) a.   There arrived a man. (but: *There broke a glass., cf. Alexiadou & Schäfer 2011)

   b.   *There walked a man.

   c.   *There ate a man an apple.

▪ **Subject expletives + passive transitive verbs**: possible in most languages (Vikner 1995: 202); English: dependent on the position of the associate:

(13) a. …at der blev spist et æble. (Danish)

   b. *There was eaten an apple. (BUT: There was **nothing** taken., Breivik 1989: 52)

▪ No such restrictions hold in languages with (pure) CP expletives (Vikner 1995: 153, Bowers 2002):

(14) a. Es   hat jemand   einen Apfel gegessen.
      EXPL has someone an   apple eaten
   b. það hevur einhver   borðað epli.
      EXPL has   someone eaten   apple

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2. A descriptive overview: restrictions – the definiteness effect

- In most languages, the associate DP must be indefinite (Milsark 1974); differences concern the availability of quantified elements:

(15)　　a. There are (**some/three/many/few/no) children** in the garden.　　(weak quantifiers)

　　　　b. *There is (are) **every/each/all/most child(ren)** in the garden.　　(strong quantifiers)

　　　　c. *There are **the children** in the garden.　　(Hinterhölzl 2019: 199)

(16)　　a. *það　hefur verið **flugan** í　súpunni.
　　　　　there has　been　fly-the in soup-the

　　　　b. *það　hefur **flugan** verið í　súpunni.
　　　　　there has　fly-the been in soup-the　(Icelandic, Thráinsson 2007: 323)

(17)　　a. það　hafa **nokkrir kettir/allir kettirnir** verið í　eldhúsinu.
　　　　　there have some cats/all the cats　　been in kitchen-the

　　　　b. það　hafa verið **nokkrir kettir/*allir kettirnir** í　eldhúsinu.
　　　　　there have been some cats/*all the cats　　in kitchen-the (Icelandic, Thráinsson 2007: 324)

2. A descriptive overview: restrictions – the definiteness effect

- **German**: Strongly quantified subjects and even definite DPs are possible:

(18) Es   haben **alle** sehr konzentriert gearbeitet.
      EXPL have   all   very concentrated worked
       'All worked very hard.'
      (A01/FEB.09687 St. Galler Tagblatt, 23.02.2001)

(19) a. Es   **haben** die besten Mannschaften des   Landkreises Gifhorn zugesagt.
         EXPL   have   the best   teams   of-the district   Gifhorn assented
         (BRZ12/JUN.00554 Braunschweiger Zeitung, 01.06.2012)
      b. Es   **hat** der Mut   gefehlt.
         EXPL has the courage lacked
         (A12/OKT.07167 St. Galler Tagblatt, 18.10.2012, S. 19)

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2. A descriptive overview: restrictions – the definiteness effect

- **German**: Pronominal subjects and proper names are ruled out:

(20) *Es   hat **sie** sehr konzentriert gearbeitet.
      EXPL has she very concentrated worked
     'She worked very hard.'

(21) ??Es   hat   **Karl** sehr konzentriert gearbeitet.
      EXPL has Karl   very concentrated worked
      'Karl worked very hard.'

2. A descriptive overview: discourse functions

- **Discourse function I:** broad focus, typically in clauses that lack a topical subject (V1 in Early Germanic) :
  - **subjectless constructions** (e.g., impersonal passives):

(22) Es   wird getanzt.
    EXPL is   danced

  - **existential and presentational constructions**, which lack a topic-comment structure and introduce a new entity into the discourse (typically realized as an indefinite subject)
    1. **existential sentences**, which often specify the location of a discourse-new entity:

(23) Es   ist [sehr viel   Schnee] auf den Straßen.
    EXPL is   very much snow   on the roads
    'There is very much snow on the roads.'

    2. **presentational sentences** describing a specific event in which a discourse-new entity participates

(24) Es   kam [ein kleiner älterer Herr]   auf die Bühne, der sehr freundlich „Guten Abend" sagte.
    EXPL came a   small   elderly gentleman onto the stage, who very friendly   good evening   said
    'A small elderly man entered the stage, who very friendly said 'good evening.'
    (https://www.suedkurier.de/ueberregional/kultur/Klaus-Doldinger-hat-s-noch-immer-drauf;art10399,9914197)

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2. A descriptive overview: discourse functions

- **Discourse function II: Introducing a new situation**
  - Sentences introduced by CP-expletives are typically found at the beginning of texts/text sections; cf. Brugmann (1917: 36f.) on German *es* 'it' (and its predecessors):

"Mit dem syntaktischen *es* werden seit mhd. Zeit gerne Sätze gebaut, die die Einleitung zu Erzählungen bilden [...]; in der ahd. Zeit bedurfte man in diesem Fall noch keiner Deckung der Anfangsstellung des Verbums. Doch hat sich unser *es* auch vielfach da eingestellt, wo man im Ahd. *thō*, im Mhd. *dō* (nhd. *da*) bei Anfangsstellung der Verbform verwendete."

'Since Middle High German (MHG) times, syntactic *es* has been used to build sentences which form the introduction to narratives [...]; in Old High German (OHG), it was still not necessary to cover the clause-initial position of the verb in these cases [by placing another element in front of the verb]. However, our *es* has often developed in contexts where OHG used *thô* and MHG *dô* (present-day German *da*) when the verb would otherwise occur in clause-initial position.'

3. Theoretical issues: Where does Expl enter the derivation?

- **Traditional idea**: Expl is inserted as a last resort into the (surface) position that must be filled (due to some EPP requirement, Chomsky 1981 and many others)
  - SpecTP for subject expletives
  - SpecCP for CP expletives
- **Alternative proposal (subject expletives)**: low base position + movement to SpecTP (Hoekstra & Mulder 1990, Zwart 1992, Moro 1997, den Dikken 1995, Groat 1999, Sabel 2000, Bowers 2002, Hazout 2004, Biberauer & Richards, Deal 2009)

⇒ asymmetry between CP expletives and subject expletives

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3. Theoretical issues: the content of Expl

- **Traditional approach**: expletives = semantically empty, non-referential elements
  - *it*-Expl: complete phi-set ⇒ full agreement
  - *there*-Expl: incomplete phi-set:
    - D (Chomsky 1995)
    - Case (Groat 1995, 1999)
    - uPerson (Chomsky 2000 et seq.)
    - combinations thereof (Lasnik 1995)
- **Alternative view**: expletives as semantically contentful elements (cf. e.g. Hoekstra & Mulder 1990, Moro 1997, Hartmann 2008, Hinterhölzl 2019, Tsiakmakis & Espinal 2022)

- **CP expletives**: (i) expletive topics (Faarlund 1990); (ii) role of phi-features?; (iii) participate in discourse anchoring (cf. e.g. Hinterhölzl 2019, van Gelderen 2021)

3. Theoretical issues: the relation between Expl and its associate

- **Traditional idea – close relation**:
  - expletive and associate form a chain (analysis of case & agreement facts, Safir 1985, 1987)
  - Expletive replacement: LF-movement of the associate to SpecTP (Chomsky 1986, 1991)
  - (feature) movement from the associate to TP (Sabel 2000, see also Kayne 2019)
- **Predication relation** (Williams 1994, Moro 1997, Hazout 2004)
- **No relation** (apart from the fact that low merge of Expl blocks raising of the associate to SpecvP, Biberauer & Richards 2005)

- **Additional problem**: position of the associate relative to non-finite verbs (English/Icelandic data in (13), (16)-(17))

3. Theoretical issues: the unaccusativity restriction

- **Case-licensing and verb movement (Vikner 1995)**: The availability of transitive expletive constructions (TECs) is linked to verb movement (an additional argument to the left of the non-finite verb can only be case-licensed after V-to-T movement has taken place)
- **Low merge accounts**: Expl is not an argument and can therefore only be merged in a non-thematic specifier (cf. e.g. Bowers 2002, Biberauer & Richards 2005, Deal 2009, Alexiadou & Schäfer 2011)

3. Theoretical approaches: the definiteness effect

- **Syntactic accounts**:
  - Safir (1985): expletive-associate chain invokes a Principle C violation (repaired by QR of indefinite NPs)
  - Belletti (1988): Associate receives partitive Case, which can only be assigned to indefinite associates
  - Chomsky (1995), Frampton (1995), Alexiadou & Anagnostopoulou (1998): [D] is locus of specificity; EPP checking by [+D] expletive means associate must be non-specific (i.e., indefinite)
  - Mikkelsen (2002): OT-based account based on the idea that an expletive is not needed (and therefore ruled out) in the presence of a definite subject
  - Kayne (2019): *there* originates from a position inside the associate; movement to SpecTP is blocked by the presence of a definite determiner.
- **Mapping from syntax to semantics (Diesing-effects)**: definite DPs are ruled out in a low VP-internal position (Groat 1995, Felser & Rupp 1997; see also Sabel 2000)
- **Semantic accounts**: existential contexts trigger indefiniteness semantically (cf. e.g. Keenan 1987 (among others))

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4. The historical development of CP-expletives: facts

- **Early Germanic**: no expletives; instead, subjectless, existential and presentational constructions often exhibit **V1-order** (cf. e.g. Faarlund 1990, 2004 on Old Norse, Breivik 1983, van Gelderen 2021 on OE, Falk 1993 on Old Swedish, Axel 2007, Petrova & Donhauser 2009, Hinterhölzl & Petrova 2009 on Old High German, Booth 2018 on Old Icelandic).

4. The historical development of CP-expletives: facts

- Old High German (OHG):

(26) **uuas** tho zit nah sehsta   (subjectless construction)
      was then hour after sixth
 Lat. hora erat quasi sexta;
      'it was about the sixth hour'
      (Tatian 275,29; Axel 2007: 142)

(27) a. **uuas** thar ouh sum uuitua/in thero burgi …   (existential construction)
         was there also some widow in that city
    Lat. vidua autem quaedam erat /In ciuitate illa …
         'There was also a widow there in that city…'
         (Tatian 201, 2; Axel 2007: 121)

   b. **giengun** thô zuo gotes engila   (presentational construction)
       went   then to God's angels
   Lat. Et ecce angeli accesserunt
       'God's angels came'
       (Tatian 115,30; Axel 2007: 121)

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4. The historical development of CP-expletives: facts

- Expletives: result of later developments –
  - *there*: Early Middle English (or slightly earlier; Breivik 1983, 1989, Haeberli 1999, van Gelderen 2021)
  - CP expletive *es:* Middle High German (13th/14th century, Lenerz 1985, Abraham 1993, Axel 2007, 2009);
  - *det/der/það* etc. in Scandinavian: even later (> 15th century, cf. Faarlund 1990, Falk 1993, Kinn 2016, Booth 2018)

- Connection with independent changes:
  - loss of inflections/expletive *pro* (Hulk & van Kemenade 1995, Haeberli 1999)
  - rise of generalized V2 (Axel 2007, 2009; Donhauser & Petrova 2009; Hinterhölzl & Petrova

  ⇒ More generally: expletives emerge in connection with the development of syntactic positions that must be overtly filled (SpecTP in English/MSC, SpecCP in all V2 languages)

4. The historical development of CP-expletives: pathways

- **Traditional view**: Across Germanic, subject expletives developed from former CP-expletives (Haiman 1974, Lenerz 1985, Breivik 1989, Faarlund 1990, Falk 1993):

(28) no CP- or subject expletive >

CP-expletive/expletive topic >

quasi-argument >

subject expletive

4. The historical development of CP-expletives: pathways

- More recent work on the diachrony of expletives in Scandinavian (Kinn 2010, 2011, 2016 on (Middle) Norwegian, Booth 2018 on Icelandic; similar facts hold for German, cf. Fuß 2021):

(29) **Norwegian**:
 no CP- or subject expletive/light locatives (*der*) & cataphoric *det* (Old Norse, 800-1350) >
 quasi-arguments (15th century)>
 subject expletives (late 15th century?)

(30) **Icelandic**:
 no CP- or subject expletive/ light locatives (*þar*) & cataphoric *það* (OI, 1150-1350)>
 subject expletive(s) (*þar* < loc. (15th c.), cataphoric subject *það*) > CP-expletive (18th cent.)
 cataphoric object *það* (subjectless constructions)> CP-expletive (19th cent.)

- Common properties:
  - **cataphoric** pronouns (and possibly light locatives) as a likely source of expletives
  - subject expletives as an intermediate developmental stage (CP-expletives develop later (Icelandic))
  - competition between expletive elements (locatives/neuter sg. pronouns)

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4. The historical development of CP-expletives: lexical sources

- **Potential lexical sources for the grammaticalization of expletives:**
  - elements with weak or ambiguous semantic content that are not necessary ingredients for the full interpretation of a clause (optional elements, or elements doubled by another XP)
    - adjuncts (light frame adverbials linked to temporal/spatial deixis) ⇒ loss of temporal/spatial properties
    - non-referential personal/demonstrative pronouns (neuter singular) linked to another DP or clause (e.g., cataphoric pronouns) ⇒ changes affecting the phoric potential (from overt phrases to more abstract categories such as events/situations)

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4. The historical development of CP-expletives: restrictions

- It appears that the unaccusativity and indefiniteness restrictions are not in place from early on but rather develop later (cf. e.g. Breivik 1989, Kiparsky 1997 on English and Håkansson 2017 on Swedish):

(31)   There may no man clepen it cowardye.

        there may no man call   it cowardice

        (Chaucer/Knight 2730; Breivik 1989: 48)

(32)   for thy thz   takir tha   sakin   thera ända ällir skugga

        for   EXPL takes then the.cause their end or   shadow

        'because then the cause or shadow take their end'

        (Old Swedish; JS; Håkansson 2017: 262)

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5. Some selected research questions I: Synchrony

- How unitary are the different types of expletives that have been suggested?
  - Are all CP expletives functionally alike?
  - Are all TP/vP expletives functionally alike or are they
  - Do TP expletives exist or are they all really vP expletives (or vice versa)?
  - Does expletive *pro* still have any value to us?

- What do traditional expletive arguments share functionally with other expletive phenomena?
  - Adverbial expletives
  - Expletive negation
  - So-called expletive functions of preposed XPs, e.g. stylistic fronting (Holmberg 2000) or Locative Inversion under a PP-subject analysis
  - Expletive heads in the lexical domain, e.g. expletive Voice (Schäfer 2007/2008, Alexiadou et al.2015)

- Are expletives truly semantically empty or have we just failed to figure out what they do?
  - Perhaps we really require a richer typology of interpretable non-referential arguments and a very limited set of true expletives, or none?

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5. Some selected research questions II: Diachrony

- What is the diachronic connection between CP-related expletives and subject expletives (cf. e.g. Haiman 1974 and Lenerz 1985 who propose that subject expletives develop from CP-expletives)?
  - Does that work, e.g. for English?

- Do definiteness effects necessarily come hand in hand with the development of subject expletives?

- What is the diachronic connection between quasi-argumental/cataphoric pronouns and expletives (cf. e.g. Brugmann 1917, Axel 2009)?

- Is there anything inherent that governs the success of one historical expletive over another?
  - Loc vs D
  - *Pro* vs overt (history of English, French)

- What circumstances are required diachronically so that...
  a) the syntax (or maybe the discourse) requires some expletive element?
  b) a given [+D] or [+locative] (or [+x]) bearing argumemt develops to become an expletive?
  c) the syntax innovates a work around, such as expletive Voice?

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5. Some selected research questions III: Theory & diachrony

- How does the diachronic development of expletives inform synchronic theoretical modelling of expletives:
  - What do the contexts in which they emerge tell us?
  - What is special about the set of elements that provide sources for expletives? Perhaps there is some hierarchy in the development characterised by the synchronic characteristics.
  - What are we to make of the observation that the definiteness and unaccusativity restrictions seem to be secondary developments?

- How can synchronic theoretical approaches to non-referential elements inform the diachrony beyond "EPP-effects"?

- Chicken and egg problem:
  - Do expletives lead to subject/V2-prefield requirements?
  - Or do these requirement lead to expletives?
  - Or somewhere in between? i.e., does incipient reanalysis of both drive further reanalysis.

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